EC-2
970310

UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 10
1200 Sixth Avenue
Seattle, Washington 98101

SEP 15 1997

Reply To
Attn Of: ECO-088

Ref. 96-104-BLM

Mr. Scott Florence
Area Manager
Bureau of Land Management
Lakeview Resource Area, Lakeview District
P.O. Box 151
Lakeview, OR 97630

Re: Beaty Butte Allotment Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Dear Mr. Florence:

In accordance with our responsibilities under the National Environmental Policy Act and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Beaty Butte Allotment Management Plan. The draft EIS analyzes five alternatives (including no action/full implementation of the existing management framework plan) to address land use plans in the Beaty Butte Allotment of the Lakeview Resource area in the Lakeview District (in Lake and Harney Counties) in Oregon.

Based on our review, we have rated the draft EIS EC-2 (Environmental Concerns - Insufficient Information). Our concerns are based primarily on the effects of water use and developments, impacts of fences on wildlife, disclosure of criteria used by the BLM to determine the significance of impacts, and the lack of alternatives examining varying grazing intensities for the entire allotment. Detailed comments on these points are enclosed. Our rating and a summary of the EPA's comments will be published in the *Federal Register*. A copy of our rating system has been enclosed with this letter for your reference.

The EPA appreciates the opportunity to review this draft EIS. If you have any questions about our comments, please contact me at (206) 553-8574.

Sincerely,

for Richard B. Parkin
Geographic Implementation Unit

enclosures

Environmental Protection Agency
Detailed Comments on the Beaty Butte Allotment Management Plan
Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Document format:

Overall, the Beaty Butte AMP/draft EIS is clear and concise. However, both the description of the affected environment and the alternatives analysis would be easier to understand if the document included graphic representations (maps) supplementing the included narrative descriptions. For example, maps delineating special management areas, areas of different vegetation or soil types or wetland and riparian habitats would make it easier for the reader to understand the affected environment and the potential impacts of the alternatives. Maps showing habitat of special status species or indicating the condition of terrestrial habitat (including problem areas) would clarify the possible impacts of the different alternatives on habitat and resident species. Moreover, if the data is available, maps showing migration routes of pronghorn antelope through the region would clarify the possible impacts on those routes due to different fence configurations. These maps need not be of the detail or size of the included maps (1 through 4). However, useful maps could be printed on letter or ledger sized pages and incorporated into the document.

Alternatives presented:

The draft EIS presents five alternatives: four alternatives whereby 26,121 animal unit months (AUMs) would be allocated to livestock grazing and one whereby no AUMs would be allocated to livestock grazing. It also appears that in almost every instance the most environmentally sound alternative is the no-grazing alternative. It is unclear why the livestock grazing level was set at 26,121 AUMs. Moreover, it is not clear why alternatives were not considered which have grazing of amounts less than the 26,121 AUMs without complete elimination of grazing. Even if such options were to require amending an existing management plan, "compromise" alternatives could provide reasonable responses to the conflicting values of protecting and utilizing the area resources. The EPA encourages the BLM to consider alternatives outside the current "all or nothing" range of options.

For example, the Jack Lake Pasture is an area excluded from grazing under Alternative 4. Exclusion of this area provides protection of sensitive plant species and pygmy rabbits (special status animal species). However, under Alternatives 2 and 3 it is grazed at 750 AUMs per year for four out of five years. Apparently, the inclusion of the Shirk Lake Ranch under the jurisdiction transfer alternative (Alt. 4) allows for AUMs which offset those lost under the Jack Lake Pasture exclusion. The EPA encourages the BLM to consider alternatives that remove such sensitive areas under contingencies where additional AUMs are not incorporated into grazing rotation.

Hydrology and water quality/quantity impacts:

The draft EIS indicates that groundwater will be withdrawn from aquifers (e.g., use of the well at Guano Lake), although the document does not specify to what extent groundwater withdrawals may occur (possibly extensive use for irrigation or livestock watering). In an arid region like the analysis area, reliability of water resources is extremely important. The final EIS would benefit from detailed discussion of the effects of groundwater use on water levels in the aquifer. The final EIS should address whether area aquifers naturally replenish at a rate equal to or greater than the rate at which withdrawals would occur. It should also discuss with specificity the effects of withdrawals of groundwater on surface water flows; the document should further address if lowered aquifer levels might impact water levels in any of the approximately 8,270 acres of wetland or aquatic habitat in the analysis area. This discussion of hydrologic continuity should reference any current surveys or modeling of aquifers in the area, and it should address monitoring procedures for withdrawal rates and aquifer levels.

Vegetation and wildlife impacts - aquatic, riparian and wetland vegetation:

Every alternative but the no-grazing alternative requires construction of reservoir/water developments, pipelines and troughs. Although the draft EIS discusses the effects of grazing rotation and fire on aquatic, riparian and wetland vegetation, the document does not meaningfully discuss the effects of surface water diversions and impoundments on vegetation in these areas. (The draft EIS does set a goal of 80% of riparian/wetland zones in Proper Functioning Condition within ten years, but it does not clarify if this includes such zones created by impoundments or if it discounts zones dried up due to diversions. It is unclear if there would be a net gain or loss in actual riparian/wetland zones due to activity under the AMP.) The draft EIS only includes a brief, general paragraph on the impacts on lotic habitat due to developments:

> *Spring developments and pipelines that remove water from the spring source would result in a decline of riparian conditions on the impacted spring. Water would be removed from the spring that would naturally be used to grow riparian vegetation.*

(From discussion in §4.7.1.1 Alternatives 1 & 2.) The draft EIS does include a disclaimer regarding the general nature of its discussion of impacts to wetland habitat (in §4.7.1.1). However, the document does not provide any meaningful information about the potential impacts of surface water diversions and impoundments. The final EIS should discuss with specificity diversion/impoundment impacts on riparian and wetland habitat where information is available; the final EIS should also specify what information is unavailable. This discussion should include an examination of the impacts on the white-faced ibis and the black tern (wetland-associated special status species).

Grazing impacts - criteria for significance determination:

The five alternatives presented in the draft EIS vary the period length and intensity that tracts within the analysis area would be grazed as well as the frequency and period length the tracts would be rested. For instance, in analyzing the impacts on terrestrial vegetation, the draft EIS

states that

> *...[regarding the impacts around Spaulding Reservoir and the Potholes] the area of vegetation heavily impacted would be greater in Alternative 2, but the length of time the vegetation would be impacted would be greater in Alternative 3.*

(From discussion §4.5.2 Alternative 3.) This and other statements like it implicitly compare the alternatives. However, the document does not consistently provide the assumptions under which the BLM is working. That is, the document does not indicate if the BLM is speculating that heavier impacts for a shorter period of time is less/more/equally damaging to lighter impacts over a longer period of time. The document should, at a minimum, summarize the BLM's working assumptions regarding variables such as grazing period length, grazing intensity and rest period length. The basis for the criteria being used to define the significance of potential impacts from project alternatives should also be included in the EIS.

Wildlife impacts - terrestrial animals:

The draft EIS indicates that all alternatives requiring fences on grazing lands will have grave, direct impacts on pronghorn antelope:

> *...the construction...of fence could significantly impact pronghorn antelope migration between the Hart Mountain NAR and Sheldon NWR. It would create multiple barriers for pronghorn antelope to cross during their biannual movement. Fencing would also cause direct mortality to pronghorn antelope, mule deer, and sage grouse.*

(From discussion §4.7.3 Alternatives 1-3.) The draft EIS indicates that the BLM would try to minimize the impacts on pronghorn antelope by adhering to standard BLM fencing specifications for wildlife. The EPA stresses the importance of maintaining this region as an access corridor between the National Antelope Refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge. The BLM should provide mitigation measures or other alternatives that consider the specific needs of the analysis area and user species (including resident sensitive species) and that go beyond the mechanical application of existing, generic standards.

Summary Paragraph Form

ERP Number D-BLM-L65294-OR

RATING EC-2

COMMENTLTR 9/15/97

Name of EPA Official Responsible For Review Of Project (Principal Reviewer)
MARESH

Summary

EPA's concerns ~~are~~ based ~~primarily~~ on ~~the effects of~~ water ~~use and developments~~, impacts ~~of fences on~~ wildlife, ~~disclosure criteria used by the~~ BLM ~~to determine the significance of impacts~~; and the lack of alternatives examining varying intensities for the entire allotment.

Approved For Publication

(Initials of OFA Approving Official)

Note: Transmit 2 copies to MIU